

The Rule of the Twelve

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Summary: The council of twelve governed the known world. When mutinys begin to stir, traitors hide undetected, war against the Dark Continent threatens their peace, and a king is asked to marry for the people, how will the council maintain control? Without revealing their true identities? A different kind of world. Some Sinei, but not a romance story.

1. Prologue

Marga knew she shouldn't have snuck away so close to her bedtime. But she just had to see.

The sun was setting as Marga ran through the street, casting a long shadow behind her as she went. The sand underneath her covered her bare feet as she twisted through the familiar streets. Her older sister would not be happy when she found out she left without wearing shoes, but she was in such a rush. If she didn't hurry to the streets, the main event would be gone before she got there. Even if she got in trouble, even if her feet got blisters, even if the other kids would call her foolish, she wanted to get there.

She wanted to see the masks.

When she finally got to the main street, a crowd was their waiting for her. Mostly curious adults and teenagers, most children her age already having been sent to bed. They all stood at the edge of the street, though none dared to take a step on it. Who knew what would happen if they got in the way? Marga was small enough that she was able to push her way through the crowd's legs, sneaking her way to the front. She stared up with wide-eyed wonder.

The procession continued on like men among beasts.

Marga couldn't count how many there were. Hundreds? No, less than that. Soldiers surrounded the group, each carrying staffs and their

shields to keep the crowd at bay. There was no point however. No one broke the line. Inside the circle were various different people, servants or workers of one palace or another. She guessed of her country, the country of Kina, but there was no way to tell. The main event however were the three that walked in the middle. One woman with long blue hair, a man with eyes the colour of smoke and a third that the other followed obediently.

The leader.

"It's one of the twelve kings," a man on Marga's right whispered. "I'll bet it's the king of Sasan."

"No way," said a woman from behind. "That woman has got to be the Queen of Kina. The one in the middle is probably one of her servants."

"I thought the leader of Kina was a King."

"I wish I knew," The girl replied with a sigh. "If only we could see."

"Both of you, hold your tongue," the man beside them hissed. "Do you want them to hear you?" Immediately both their mouths clamped shut, glancing at the guards to see if they had heard. But if they had, they didn't show it. Their helmets were much less elaborate than those they protected, just regular old soldier hats. Marga knew the knights had no reason to keep their identity secret, and only wore the helmets to remind the people of just who they were guarding. Unlike the knights, soldiers and servants who surrounded the three in the middle, their masks were just for show. Not even all of them wore masks, instead only hiding behind a thin veil or nothing at all. They didn't need to hide. Why would they?

Their identities were not unknown.

Others whispered desires of wanting to know what hid under the masks of the three in the centre. But they all knew it was a lost dream.

Even Marga knew that.

She just wanted to see the pretty masks.

Only three were wearing the magic masks she had heard of for as long as she could remember. One with short white hair had a mask that went from below his left eye to the right bottom of his chin. The mask was white, plain compared to the others. It had silver strips that started at its eyes and slanted towards the bottom. There was a green paint around the edge, outlining the corner of his mouth that was covered. There was not a scratch on the carved porcelain. Marga imagined that the mask would be as smooth and cold as paint as it slid across the canvas.

The other, a woman with bright blue hair, had a mask that only covered her eyes and nose. It was the colours of the sea, and depending on the time of day, could be sea green, midnight black or bright blue. There were pearls at the corners of each eye, and faded pink sea shells with pointed ends that started at the mask than ended just above her ears. Her mask was covered in sparkles that reminded

Marga of the sea when the sun was high in the sky. The crowning achievement, in the centre was a white jewel the shape of a tear.

Finally, the third mask absolutely memorised her. It was purple, covering the man's eyes and the top of his nose. From the right eye the mask continued up to make the shape of three small waves, each framed with gold and one falling down to the other eye. The left eye was framed with gold, which branched out to design the mask with elegant swirls that had no pattern, yet they all made sense. All the colours were glazed so that they shone evenly but not enough to be to eye-catching. The ends of the mask were pointed, one with the waves and the other on its own. It reminded Marga of a purple crown, simply on the face instead of above. It screamed power, yet control. Excitement yet serenity.

It was a dream of Marga's to own a mask like theirs. If even just to wear one for a while.

But despite her age, she knew it would never come true.

Even from where Marga was hidden, she could see the golden paint on the other side, evidence of the magic that no one had confirmed, but everyone knew was real. She'd always wondered if the legend had been true. If the masks really were cursed. Her friend Otto had used to say that the masks were made of the bones of their ancestors, but Marga didn't believe that. Retta had said they were enchanted so that if anyone ever saw underneath the mask, they would turn to ashes in an instant. Marga hoped that wasn't true. But she had no proof.

No one had any proof.

It was all just speculation.

"Marga!" she jumped out of her trance at the sound of her name. "Marga? Marga, where are you?" she cringed, the fantasy falling away as reality seeped back in. She knew that she couldn't run. It would just make it worse when she eventually went home.

Slipping through the crowd she made her way towards the voice. From her eye line she was able to make out the familiar sandals that were tied just below her knees, underneath her plain pink dress. Marga hurried over to her, finally meeting her so she could stare up at her bright blue eyes.

"Marga!" Hakuei exclaimed. Her hair swooshed to the side as she knelt down to examine her. "Are you alright? You know not to run off like that!" Marga didn't protest as Hakuei turned her gently to make sure she hadn't gotten scratched. Sometimes Marga thought her sister could be to overprotective. She knew better than to say that out loud.

Once she was sure Marga was okay, Hakuei got to her feet and put her hands on her hips. "Marga, you know just as well as I do that you can't leave before it gets dark without telling someone! Mistress Madaura won't be happy."

Panicked slipped through her when she looked up at Hakuei with pleading eyes. "D-don't tell Madaura that I ran out! Please sister, she'll be so mad! Mother can be so scary when she's mad!" Hakuei

hesitated.

But eventually gave in. "Alright, I won't tell her. Just promise you won't do this again, alright." Marga sighed gratefully as she took her hand, allowing her older sister to lead her away from the crowd and back towards their home. "Why did you sneak out anyway," Hakuei asked in curiosity. "It's not like you."

She bowed her head so she didn't have to meet her gaze. "I know, I'm sorry. I just wanted to see the masks," She added, glancing back wistfully to catch the last glimpses of the royal members as they walked towards the palace, ignoring the whispers of the crowd that had gathered around them. Hakuei glanced back, but unlike Marga who looked with wonder and awe, Hakuei's eyes were filled with annoyance and pity.

"You shouldn't go out of your way to see them," Hakuei advised her with a sharp edge to her tone. "You don't want to get involved in the politics of their lives." But the young girl didn't hear her.

"What do you think it's like?" Marga asked innocently, missing Hakuei's comment. "To wear masks like that? To live among the 12? It sounds incredible," She sighed, imagining a life different with hers with naïve optimism.

Hakuei on the other hand barely glanced back at the group that passed on. "I think it would be rather horrible," she answered honestly. "To have to hide yourself for so long so that your own face could become your mask." Marga did not hear her, entranced by the ideas that were dancing in her head.

Legend had it, the twelve kings and queens from each nation ruled the lands in a council of unity. No one knew who their leaders were. They could be a man you passed by in the street. Or a child who asked for an extra piece of bread. It was impossible to know. Until they told you.

If you paid attention enough, you could discover who the ruler of each country was, but not know who they really were. A person could match a mask to a country, but it took time and effort to discover the truth. They had no reason to tell the population so it was hard to find out. Their names were not secrets, but again, unless you met one in person or someone else told you, there was no way for the common citizens to know. The people of Kanji, the capital of the Kina Kingdom, could only refer to them by the designs of their masks, styles of their hair, or generally call them 'a member of affiliate of the council of 12.' Not only were the 12 members made to wear masks, but so were their direct subordinates, family members or anyone else who knew their identity. No one could know who hid underneath the mask. Each mask was entranced with magic to make sure that did not change.

The only way for it to change was if someone with a mask told you who they were, or took their mask off in front of you. Then the person would be able to see through the mask.

But for regular citizens, that was just a dream. So instead, the continued on, sending suspicious glances at strangers or even fellow civilians, in case they were royalty in true form. Many people wanted to know. Who were the ones with the power of a djinn? The ones who

had magical powers that they could not understand. The people who held the lives of their friends and family in their hands. The very people who could change their lives with a snap of a finger.

Most people wanted to know.

Others didn't care.

Often, it was the ones who didn't want to know who found the truth.

****Hi guys! New story! Hopefully it will work out well. It's the same time with the same powers of the regular magi universe, but politics, where people are and historical events are different. I don't own magi. ****

2. Meeting of the Twelve

Meeting of the Twelve

****I just want to remind people that in this world, though most of the people and powers are the same, the history of people and their countries are different. If details don't match up with the manga, it's likely done on purpose for a plan I have later in the future. It won't make sense right away, but it will in time. ****

As soon as the servant had shut the doors behind them, they bowed low to the newcomers. "Welcome king Sinbad and Princess Yamuriha."

Yamu and Jafar nodded at the servants while Sinbad went ahead. In the centre of the room the rest of the twelve sat around a round table with their advisors or siblings standing at their sides. Sinbad couldn't recognize them all by the masks, he'd lost track. Yamu hurried over to her Magnustand's spot, though they would have no say in the meeting without her father, their king, there to attend. Sinbad wondered what his excuse was. Beside them was the King of Heliophat with two advisors and the prince who Sinbad recognized as Sharkkon. Balbaad had their king with his two brothers and guards behind him. Yamato of Kina had the largest chair, since it was his country. There was Phartevia's queen, Artemyra's queen, Kou's king and prince, as well as two Kings from Laem. Their chairs were squished into their spot, both of them looking very uncomfortable with the arrangement. From what Sinbad had heard of their politics, he wasn't surprised.

The Kings of Sasan, Akita and the Queen of Imuchakk had not arrived yet, but he was not surprised. Their countries were even further away from Kina than Sindria was. Despite that, Kouen glared at him when he took his spot next to Balbaad and Jafar stood behind him.

"You're late," Kouen told him. Hid red mask that covered his eyes was very simple, only a black outline and flames at the bottom. Sinbad still remembered when Kouen had become ruler after his father had passed and he'd shown them his true identity. It had been the most recent time someone had revealed their true identity to the council, but it was a rule that they all did. Anyone who entered their meetings must have shown their face ahead of time.

"Ah, sorry about that," Sinbad apologized easily as he leaned back in

his chair. "We may have taken a few wrong turns on our way getting here." Jafar mumbled under his breath how 'taking a few wrong turns' did not mean 'spend time flirting with palace women.' Sinbad ignored him.

Kouen did not look pleased, but as always, he let it go. "Very well. Since we are all here, I believe we should get started."

"Should we not wait until all of the twelve have arrived," Titus asked. His mask was gold on one half, black on the other, with white jewels like tears trailing down from the eyes. It fit over his entire face, leaving only the mouth to be seen. That did surprise Sinbad. Of all of them, Titus was the most willing to share his identity with others.

Koumei, and man who wore a mask on half his face that was simply black with a few white outlining, answered him. (It actually reminded Sinbad of a bird) "The Kings of Sasan and Akita have run into some difficulties on their way here, and won't arrive for another week. They have asked us not to make any decisions that will affect their countries until they arrive. As well, Magnustands ruler had some important business to attend to and will not be free until tomorrow." There was some murmurs through the crowd, but no one spoke up. Yamu, their king's daughter, remained silent. A representative of the king could not do anything in the meeting, they all knew. "As well, Queen Rurumu of Imuchakk will not arrive for more than a month." Sinbad raised his eyebrow skeptically.

"Why?"

Kouen paused. His guests could see through the mask him surveying the room, noting all the faces before answering. "From what we had heardâ€|her mask has broken."

At first it was silence. Sinbad whistled. Others gasped so softly it sounded like a simple breeze. Jafar's eyes widened behind his mask, disbelief evident in his expression. The masks that were made for the royalty of the countries elite had been made for each new leader and their affiliates long before their reign even began. Rurumu was the daughter of the earlier leader, before his assassination by a group of traveling assassins, which meant she had her mask for years. They knew the masks were not invincible, yet never had a mask been damaged. Magicians who served under the royalty were charged with making sure the masks would not fall off, completely conceal the identity of the wearer, as well as making sure that they would not break under battle, harsh weather, or any kind of magic. The only times masks were destroyed was if the wearer was destroyed and they had no use for the mask anymore. The only country that passed their masks on from generations instead of making new ones were Sasan and Artemyra. Which meant the masks couldn't have been destroyed by ageâ€|

Interrupting the silence, Sinbad asked, "Did they say how her mask was broken?" Sinbad knew he was not the only one whose mind immediately flashed back to the assassins who had killed her father.

The King of kou did not seem surprised by the question. "They gave us no further detail other than that the mask was broken and they would not leave their lands until it was complete." Sinbad frowned, but was

not surprised. The people involved with the twelve were always secretive, and despite their supposed trust, they kept just as many secrets from others in the Twelve.

Ahbmada of Balbaad leaned back in his chair like it was a couch. "Fine. We won't be making any final decisions. Can we start the meeting?" Other rulers sent each other annoyed glances which the king of Balbadd didn't notice, too absorbed in whatever world he thought he was the king of. The third prince's cheeks turned a shade brighter with embarrassment for his brother, or perhaps that was just from the bright red and orange mask which looked like it was constantly on fire. If it wasn't for the golden chain that reached both sides from the middle, Sinbad would have assumed his mask really was on fire.

Raising an eyebrow, Kouen obeyed. "Fine. As we all know, there are a few things that we need to discuss over the next three months that will affect all our countries. I believe most of our topics should not be discussed without all our leaders here." He paused for assurance from all the leaders. None of them objected, so he continued. "For now, we must discuss the battle strategies for the upcoming war against the Dark Continent." A few murmurs were spread through the room, mostly the servants and associates of the Twelve. Not many of the kings or queens could speak even in whisper. Anything they said at the table must be shared with them all.

"Have we confirmed that we are going to war against the Dark Continent?" Queen Serendine of Parthevia asked skeptically. All of them knew how included Kouen especially was on going straight to war.

Kouen must have known they knew this, for he gave an explanation. "In the last meeting, unfortunately you had to leave early because of the trouble in your kingdom your majesty, we decided to at least go along with planning strategies for the battle and wait to see what they do before actually putting any plans into action. If they do not attack or send us any message by the end of this year, we will attack on our own." The rest of the members nodded in agreement while Serendine tried to conceal her disapproval.

Even though he wouldn't say it out loud yet, Sinbad agreed with her disapproval. The Dark Continent was an area no one had ever visited, or at least said that they visited, in known history. They had never made any contact with anyone outside of their nation, and they were cut off from the world by a series of caves and darkness, called the line between the known and unknown world. Sinbad had visited the countries around, but he'd never been to the continent itself. Rumors of the people in the land spread from nation to nation. Children with the power of beasts. Creatures that popped out of the ground and ate a man alive. Nothing had been confirmed. For decades before, most had decided to leave them alone.

Until a recent incident.

The council decided they had no choice to get involved.

"The armies of Kou are ready to take on the Line separating the known and unknown world," Kouen told them. "We recommend the armies of Artemyia and Sasan go with them in order to be able to travel the terrain." They continued talking about the difference strengths and

weaknesses of various armies, how many people should stay in case the war was brought home, and where exactly they should try to invade. Sinbad leaned back in his seat, pinching his nose in exasperation. He couldn't believe he'd come all that way, considering all the problems that they could have been discussing, for battle strategies? Sometimes he wondered if the twelve secretly wanted to avoid the truth of the situations in their countries.

They must have known they couldn't avoid their nation's problems forever.

"Can we guarantee that the public minds of all our nations are on our side?" The prince of Balbaad mumbled too loudly. They doubted he had meant for anyone to hear him, but they had. A few of them actually turned to him, interested in his statement.

The king of his country hissed at him. "Prince Alibaba, shut up! Who said you were allowed to talk?" Alibaba closed his mouth and hung his head sheepishly.

"No, speak." Sinbad ordered, excited someone had finally changed the subject to something more interesting. "I want to hear what he means by that." Ahbmad did not look happy, but begrudgingly he waved the okay for his brother to speak.

Alibaba looked surprised anyone had even heard him, but hurried to answer before he could lose his chance. "I think all our leaders can agree that each country has forms of mutiny because of how many things we hide from them. In some cases, because of how private the royal courts are, they may as well not even live in their own countries. If we ask them to go to war against a country they don't know about, for a task that we likely will not tell them, and serve under people who won't show their faces to us, can we guarantee that they will all lift their swords? Some may see it as a chance to rebel against their king- or queen," He added hastily, glancing at the queen of Artemyra. The fact that no one objected meant they

"What do you propose we do prince Alibaba?" Titus asked politely. At the question Alibaba hesitated, surprised that anyone had taken him seriously as he also came to the realization he hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Iâ€¦I'm not sure. W-we could start by giving them a better reason to go to war than 'the strangers who wear masks' say so."

"He's not wrong," Queen Serendine noted. "Just on my way here I overheard a crowd speaking against our rule, saying we were too suspicious and have too much power." A few grumbles were passed around the table. Sinbad overheard someone say, 'that wouldn't happen in my country.' he doubted that comment would get him very far.

"It is a tradition for the kings and queens identity's to be hidden from the public," Koumei, prince of Kou, added in. "For the safety of the ones who rule, so they can detach themselves from personal affections to their citizens and think of the good of all countries of the alliance, and to maintain a power over the people through the citizens ignorance, among other things," Koumei quickly finished, deciding not to go into detail the reason for the masks that had been decided upon centuries ago. They all knew the history.

However, the king of Kina murmured, "You know, with all that is happening lately, can we really afford to follow tradition? The masks are supposed to install fear in our citizens, but all that fear is doing for some is making them want to get rid of us."

"Are you suggesting we get rid of our masks?" The Queen of Artemyra demanded incredulously. From the shocked eyes and glances of doubt that went around the room, Sinbad could tell that they had gotten off topic.

If he didn't intervene, things were going to get out of hand. "No one is saying we need to get rid of the masks," he told them, all attention shifting towards him. "We just need to give the citizens of the twelve nations a reason to trust that the masks are for the best once again. The masks install a fear into the citizens so they do not attack their rulers, but we can't forget they were originally also intended to be a reassurance for the people. We all know how valuable identity and secrets are. With ours kept hidden, they believe that we hold an upper hand against our enemies, whether we actually do or not, since the people only know of the rumors that go around. As far as they know, the dark continent is nothing but an anthill against our power."

"But King Sinbad, perhaps that is the problem." Titus interjected. "Just because the people believe we have the power to do anything, doesn't mean they know we will use it for the best. In the past our ancestors kept their identities secret while still speaking to the public freely, but now we have become too distant with them. As far as they know, or what some of them believe already, we don't care of the people and have no reason to help them. If it were a battle, how can we guarantee that we will stay by their side and have their best interests at heart? The people are just as afraid of us as they are of our enemies."

A silence slipped through the crowd as they debated his words. Few of the leaders were foolish to say he was wrong. The masks were a tradition of their ancestors that had worked in the past.

However, the past had worked differently than the present.

"So we need to reassure the public," Kouen concluded. "Make them believe we are on their side—Assure them we are no different while still convincing them we hold a higher power—" Sinbad didn't believe that would be too hard to convince, his metal vessel strapped against his waste like a trinket. He doubted showing the people one of his strongest weapons would be the smartest move.

"Personally, in most countries I don't believe this is as big a problem as it is in others." Queen Serendine voiced her opinion. "Most countries have succeeded in staying in touch with the public while still keeping their identity, power, and the workings of the palace a secret."

"True," Aarmakon spoke up, reminding everyone that he was actually there. "But the biggest countries, the ones with a bigger population, are the ones that don't see their rulers regularly. Those countries would be Kou, Parthevia, and Laem." Titus glared at Nerva from behind his mask, showing that he had thought the same thing before the meeting many times before. Nerva pretended not to notice him, feigning surprise at the suggestion. The two of their approaches to

governing their nations were extremely different, Sinbad had learned from meetings in the past. Nerva was more traditional, and liked to avoid any problems that suggested the old ways needed to be changed. Titus, when he had joined, showed a very different idea, and that he wanted many things in their country to change. He was more open even with his identity, though for a while Sinbad hadn't been sure if he was a boy or a girl. Because of the political struggle in the country, neither of them got to make any decisions as of late.

Out of curiosity, Sinbad wondered just how they were going to decide which one would lead.

His question was answered before he could even say it.

"In Laem, we will hold an election." Titus gave his suggestion before anyone could stop him. "We'll allow the people to elect their officials before we start the war." His fellow leader swirled around in his chair to stare at him in outrage.

"An election?" Nerva shouted. "Are you insane?"

But Titus held firm. "No. let's allow the people to decide which one of us they want to rule. That way we can get closer to the people while also solving our own political problems." If Jafar wouldn't have criticized him for it, Sinbad would have laughed out loud when his mouth dropped open.

"Y-you want to let the people decide politics?" he summarized, as if hoping he would say something different.

"It's never been done before," Armakon noted, but he did not look bothered by the idea.

Ahbmada on the other hand shook his head. "That sounds like a terrible idea. Who would let their people decide such important matters? What do they know compared to those who have been groomed for success like us?"

"I'd watch your tongue Ahbmada," Queen Mira purred humouredly. "Not all our members here were fed hand and foot on a silver platter."

"Let's put it to a vote," the king of Kina, Yamato, suggested. "I like votes. Since it's only for Laem, I doubt it's a problem if not all our members are here." The others glanced at each other for confirmation. They all nodded in approval. "Alright. Those who are against the votes raise your hands."

Nerva, Ahbmada, Kouen and surprisingly, Mira, raised their hands. Sinbad raised an eyebrow at her, but she just shrugged. The mischievous glance she gave him behind her feathered mask. Jafar would not have been happy with the ideas Sinbad started to get.

"And those in favour?" Titus, Serendine, Armakan, and Yamato raised their hands. Everyone turned to Sinbad expectantly, waiting his response. He glanced from Titus to Nerva, then to all the others at the table. Perhaps it wasn't well known, or according to how they saw he acted, they would have assumed he would have been one of the few not to be bothered if the twelve became more public.

They were wrong.

Sinbad did not want them to become more public. He wanted to know the exact number of people who knew who he was before anyone else did. He wanted to be able to count the people who knew his true power on his hand. He wanted the only ones who knew close details about him to be people who he could keep so close he could say where they were at all times. Sinbad, more than most he assumed, had many secrets he knew should never come out.

But the thing about having many secrets?

They were safer as long as the secrets of others could be used to hide them.

"I vote in favour," Sinbad told them after quite some time. Nerva cursed under his breath while Titus smiled at Sinbad gratefully. Sinbad smiled cheerfully back, already putting a plan in motion to get Titus on his side. How many secrets could the so-called golden boy have that Sinbad could use to help keep his hidden?

"It's decided then," Kouen concluded, ignoring the annoyed grunts Nerva and Ahbmad gave. Mira and Kouen did not seem too bothered by losing the vote, and continued as normal. "However, it does not help with our other countries, Kou and Parthevia. And while these are the countries with the most problems with the citizens, they are not the only ones with these problems."

"Let's do something here in Kina," Yamato suggested. "If the people from the other countries see we put lots of effort into helping a country with as small a population as my country has, they would be assured that they would absolutely be in our thoughts. While it is not a permanent solution, it is a quick one if we are to go to war soon." From conversing with Yamato on a personal level, Sinbad knew he secretly just wanted more attention to be spent on his small island of a country.

As the discussions went on, Sinbad groaned and leaned back in his chair. He was getting nothing done. They hadn't even approached the subject that he'd wanted to discuss, and what they did want to speak of held little to no interest to him. "Jafar, how much longer was this meeting supposed to go again?" Jafar's death glare sent chills up Sinbad's spine.

"I'd be careful if I were you your majesty," Jafar advised. "Who knows when the lights will turn on you?"

3. Rebellion in the Streets

Rebellion in the Streets

Hakuryuu knew it would be better for everyone if he kept his mouth shut. Just stay down, just stay low, don't do anythingâ€¦

That lasted all of five seconds.

WHAM!

Fatima went down with a crash. The child who had been cowering in

fear just a moment ago went running to Hakuryuu and hid behind his leg. If Hakuryuu wasn't busy trying to look brave, he would have told the kid to run faster than he'd ever run before. Too late, Fatima picked himself off the floor, rubbing the fresh bruise on his cheek. And boy, did he look angry.

"Hakuryuu!" He screamed, his voice boomed through the house. "How dare you attack me! Are you trying to start a fight?" Hakuryuu bared his teeth, his eyes flashed murderously at the idea.

It hadn't been his intent, but he had no problem with it. "If you want to fight, I'm willing to. It's about time we found out if you can really land a punch on someone who isn't less than half your size." The young boy behind him shivered, pulling on Hakuryuu's pants to hide his face. Hakuryuu ignored that.

He also ignored the fact that Fatima was actually a foot taller than him, and much wider. "Did you forget who is in charge here? Do you want to be put in your place?" His hand reached down into his pocket where the whole house knew he kept his blade. Hakuryuu tensed, but didn't back down. _Fine. At least he'll get injured just as much.

—

"Fatima!" Both of them turned to see Hakuei. Her dark hair was loose at her sides, and Hakuryuu guessed she'd woken up recently. In a rush she placed herself in between Hakuryuu and Fatima before he could object. "Stop it, what are you two doing? You can't fight in here, there are children around." Hakuryuu hoped she wasn't talking about him. Only then did he notice a few other children peeking through one of the doors that lead to the hallway they were having their argument. He should have known better than to have hoped for privacy in an orphanage of over fifty kids.

The second man in charge glowered down at Hakuei angrily. "Your younger brother just punched me in the face! He's the one who started it, I was just going to finish it." Hakuei cast a glare in her brother's direction, one that he quickly interpreted as, _we'll talk later._

"I'm sure my brother feels very guilt for what he did, but you need to stop. Let it go Fatima."

"Who do you, "

"Do you really want to get mother angry?" Hakuei suggested. "She's taking a nap. Do you want her to hear you?" That shut Fatima up like a light being flicked off. Even Hakuryuu became more aware of the noise he made.

Madaura was the 'mother' of the cities orphanage. It was a large building that had used to be a museum until the city had rebuilt it. Old, but not falling apart at least. Yet. It still had the smell of old stones and clay from the sculptures. Madaura oh so generously took in all the children that the city brought to her. Madaura, the lady that the whole town brought up as a saint. The 'mother' of the town where all the children who lived around admired her. The woman who took children in as her own.

As long as you were valuable enough.

She was required, by law, to take in anyone who was brought to her. Madaura had been able to scheme some personal providence out of it. She made sure that the children loved her. She MADE the children love her. That way, when the children got old, they would go and be successful, then come back and give her whatever she liked. If you were not someone she thought would be useful to her in later years, you might as well have not existed. You'd have to do whatever it took to please mother unless you wanted to be completely destroyed by the children who she favoured and allowed to do whatever they thought was necessary in order to make the other children useful.

Years ago, that was the kind of home Hakuryuu and his older sister Hakuei had been forced to live in. They'd had a hard time for a while, since Madaura didn't see any use of a child with ugly burns and another who burned the entire kitchen whenever she tried to cook. Hakuei had been able to stay in her good graces enough so that at least the others left them alone. For the most part. Hakuryuu still made enemies from time to time, Fatima being one of them. Fatima had become one of those useful children who Hakuryuu had hated the instant he'd met him. As time went on, Fatima had become a favourite while Hakuryuu just did his best to avoid him and 'mother' entirely. It had been years since then, and while Hakuei was an adult and was allowed to leave, Hakuryuu was still a teenager. So Hakuei stayed and worked under Madaura, until Hakuryuu would be old enough for the two of them to leave.

Shaking off his anger, Fatima put on a smug smile. "Right. I forgot Hakuryuu always needs his sister to come and protect him." Hakuryuu's cheeks grew hot as his pride was taken down another notch.

"Big words from a momma's-" Hakuryuu tried to yell, but Hakuei elbowed him in the ribs before he could.

"You should get down to mother before she wakes," She suggested with her passive, 'I'm innocent so you can listen to me,' voice. "Be ready if she needs anything."

At the thought of mother needing his assistance, Fatima instantly forgot his anger. "Fine. Try to get your little brother under control." Neither of them commented as he stormed away to the stairs, also ignoring the children who peaked out of their rooms curiously. As soon as he had left, the children went back to their own lives. The child behind Hakuryuu mumbled a small thank you before rushing off so quickly Hakuryuu hardly saw him move. What an odd kid.

Hakuryuu huffed and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I don't need you to come and fight my battles for me sister. I can handle myself," he told her, so angry she could feel it in the air.

The anger must have been contagious, for she frowned back at him just as angry. "I wouldn't have to if you didn't start fights with him. You know he is Madaura's favourite. Even if you did win a fight with him, you'd be the only one punished for it. Honestly Hakuryuu," She sighed when Hakuryuu turned away from her. "I don't understand you sometimes. Why do you always want to fight the people here?"

"He was trying to attack Micheol," Hakuryuu defended himself, pointing in the direction the boy had ran. "I was just trying to defend a kid, or is that wrong?" Hakuei shook her head, tired of a

conversation they'd had many times already.

"There are more ways to defend someone than by using violence."

"Sometimes fighting is the only way to fix a problem," he told her stubbornly.

"Not always," Hakuei tried to argue.

"More often than none," He fought back. "At least when I fight with Fatima or her other 'children' I get something done. I swear if I did nothing, some of these kids may as well be her slaves. If she got the chance, she'd probably make them into some," he muttered under his breath.

His sister glanced around nervously, making sure the children couldn't hear them arguing. He didn't know why she bothered. They already knew. "You know slavery is illegal here brother," Hakuei tried to reassure him. "And she's not going to try anything so close to the palace when members of the Twelve are there." That was true. It was one of the reasons Hakuryuu had grown to respect and admire the mysterious twelve kings from a distance. No matter how evil a person was, they would never try and do anything that would get the attention of the Twelve. No matter how powerful you were, the Twelve were to be respected.

Abruptly changing the subject, Hakuryuu returned to another conversation they'd had before. "You should leave sister," He advised her. "Others stay because they believe she is their mother, but you don't have to! You're an adult, go find a place and get away from her." Ignoring her brother's wishes Hakuei gave him a sad smile.

"And leave my foolish brother and all the children here on their own? Even if I did leave, where would I go? The only money we have is from me working here, and all that goes to paying for food and medicine. No, I'll stay here with everyone."

"For how much longer?" Hakuryuu whined. "You don't want to stay here forever, do you?" She didn't respond. Hakuryuu was a dreamer, and wanted to do big things with his life, or at least get a choice in what happened in his life again. Hakuei was more realistic. She just wanted to live her life in peace, away from the attention of others. There was no need to cause any problems. As long as she and the ones she cared about were happy, she trusted that things would turn out alright.

Without giving him a straight answer, she patted her brother on the shoulder. "Let's just wait until you are old enough to leave," Hakuei advised. Her brother huffed, but didn't pursue the topic. It never got to far anyway.

Pulling away from him, Hakuei picked up an empty basket as well as a small sack filled with coins. "For now, I need to go to the shop and get some fruits. We ran out yesterday, and I need to get some before dinner tonight." Her brother didn't reply, stewing in his own disappointment. With a sigh, she glanced around the room. "Do you know where Marga is right now? I want to bring her with me after last night." Right. Hakuei had told him how Marga had snuck out to see members of the twelve walking through town. Hakuei had said it was

silly how she'd risked Madaura's anger just so she could see a couple of masks.

Hakuryuu had said if he'd known they were in town, he'd have done the same thing.

Hakuei had told him to be quiet.

"I don't think mother Madaura knows that she snuck out, but I don't want to risk Marga saying something and her finding out," Hakuei was saying, oblivious to her brother who was stuck in his own world. "If she keeps talking about the masks she's going to find out she disobeyed her and left without permission."

Stubbornly Hakuryuu grunted, "Last I saw her she was playing with a cat in front of the house." His sister smiled in contrast to his scowl.

"Thank you," Hakuei replied pleasantly. "When I come back, I certainly hope Mr. Grumpy will be gone and my brother will have returned." Hakuryuu's mouth twitched up slightly, but not enough. Hakuei sighed before turning away to go on a search for someone who would hopefully be more cheerful company.

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She was not disappointed.

"Look Hakuei! It's a cat! It's a little kitty cat with her babies! Can I go pet it, please?"

Part of her missed her grumpy, calm, collected younger brother.

The other half had a hard time hiding the smile as she pulled Marga back to her side. They walked through the market without difficulty, for a change. Vendors held their sales on either side of the street, filled with exotic fruits, meats, pastries, pots and a few clothes. Their ears were filled with the sound of merchants trying to sell their products or customers bargaining to get their product for a lower price. Any clean air was filled with the smell of foods being cooked or the hot sand on the ground. The market had no shelter from the sun, and their feet were barely protected from the sand with their sandals. It wasn't an unusual type of weather for the market. Residents of the city were used to both the heat and the cold, being near the ocean but close to the equator. Business should have been as usual.

But as they walked, Hakuei noticed how little people were in the market. Where was everybody?

After she'd finally freed the kitten from Marga's grasp, the younger girl hurried over to the familiar stall that held various fruits, vegetables and other goods. Leila, a girl with honey blond hair and eyes as warm as the sun but as dark as the earth, caught sight of them after she handed a customer a bag of apples. With a grin she leaned over their products to get a better look at Marga who began searching through all the foods for a little snack. "Hey you two. I was wondering when someone from your crew was going to come and pick up some food. Seems like you need something new every week."

Hakuei followed the younger girl to the fruits and smiled pleasantly at Leila. "It's not a crew, it's an orphanage. There are many children there who seem to think they need more food than they can handle." Leila chuckled while Hakuei glanced around at their stall. "Is Sasha not here today?"

"Naw," Leila waved the question away. "She and her dad had to go and convince some of our partners from Kou to continue trading with us. You got a list you need today?"

While handing her the list, Hakuei continued the conversation. "Why do your partners want to cut off their connections here?"

Her friend answered while taking Hakuei's basket to start loading it up. "They said they don't think there is any point in trading with us here when they can get better business in other countries. Kina isn't really big, and not too much happens here to draw others to the country." With a shrug she said, "I guess I can't really blame them. The country of Kina isn't as big as other countries, you know?"

"I wouldn't know," Hakuei told her. "I've never traveled outside of this city." Shaking the thought aside she asked, "If they decide to stop trading with you, do you think you'll leave?"

The thought worried Hakuei, but Leila seemed relaxed. "No, we'll stay I'm sure. Sasha's father has other businesses in other countries to help us out if things do go bad, and the guy we trade with doesn't want to risk pulling out of any country with how quickly things change nowadays. Rebellions, strange happenings and political strife and the like." Taking a break, she leaned forward so she could whisper for only Hakuei to hear. "Sasha's dad thinks that things are going to pick up here real soon, thanks to the twelve. Rumors say they are all meeting in the palace over the next few days."

Hakuei drew back, shock written all over her face. "All of the twelve? Here? In this city?" Marga shot up from her spot on the ground where she'd been spying on a merchant making what looked like a vase.

Their seller was much more relaxed, returning to her works as she continued. "Yeah. You saw them coming through town yesterday, right? Some say they weren't the only ones who came here, but that a bunch are here. A few people believe that more are coming!" Marga squealed happily at the thought. More? Marga had never seen more than the three she'd seen the night before. Was it possible that there was going to be even more in her city?

Unfortunately, her caretaker was less than thrilled, and more than skeptical. "It seems odd that they would all meet here in Kina. Why would they come here instead of one of the larger countries?" Again, Leila shrugged.

"I mean, you can't know for certain," Leila admitted as she finished packing the basket full with apples. "It's impossible to know without knowing someone in the palace, and even then you can't know for certain. But Sasha has a friend who works as a guard, and he said he's seen an official from at least 8 of the twelve countries there in the last week."

Marga felt her heart skip a beat with glee, while Hakuei's sped on

with worry. Rumors said that the twelve were constantly traveling from one country to another to keep in touch. Some even said a king would not spend more than half a year in his own country because he was traveling so often. She'd seen many officials come through the streets, and often heard rumors of another leader in the kingdom and such. But she'd never heard of so many meeting in one place at a time. The last time she could remember their even being rumors was during the coronation of a member from Laem. And even then those rumors were farfetched and she couldn't tell which ones she could take to heart. There had been a battle during the coronation? There were two kings? One of them was both a boy and a girl, while the other was stabbed 57 times?

She'd stopped listening after that one.

"What do you think they're all doing here?" Marga asked, reminding both her elders that she existed. Her eyes were wide with excitement and curiosity. "Do you think they'll host a party?"

Hakuei sighed, wishing that traveller Nando had never told her about the allegedly magical parties held in Sindria. Leila on the other hand laughed at her curiosity. "Who knows anything about those people? I once heard a rumor that they were all secretly demons trying to control the known world, and their masks were to hide the darkness in their eyes."

Instead of scaring Marga, all she did was encourage her. "Well I heard that the real kings and queens were killed centuries ago, and that the ones who are in charge now are the descendants of the assassins who killed them, and that's why they have to wear the masks so no one finds out."

"Oh yeah?" Leila listened as she handed Hakuei her basket and she counted out the coins. "A customer once told me that all of the kings and queens are magicians, and a spell went wrong cursing them to all be disfigured forever."

"Anja told me that the powers they have that they call djinns are actually living beings who live in swords and metal!"

"Pff. That's got to be the craziest theory I've heard yet!" Leila laughed when Hakuei handed her the pay. Marga's cheeks got red with embarrassment.

"It's true! She learned it from a traveller that wore a pointy green hat and flew away on a magic broom!"

Before could respond, Hakuei took the basket and told her, "Not all the stories that your friends tell you are true Marga." Ignoring Marga's disappointment she added, "And even if it is, it's none of our business. We shouldn't be so concerned with the lives that we will never get involved in." Marga huffed and went back to staring at the foods on display. No matter what Hakuei did or said, she never seemed to want to give up the hope that the twelve were secretly magical people with amazing stories that had no explanation. She didn't want to admit that the magical world full of monsters and adventures and princesses and happy endings weren't as happy and carefree as she hoped.

From the outside, Leila watched the exchange with fascination. "What,

aren't you curious to know what goes on in their secret lives of luxury?" Leila questioned in disbelief. "Personally, I'd love to see what it is like to live in their shoes. Be in control of hundreds of being, able to go around without anyone knowing who you are ,having magical powers that we can't even understand-

"And living in a world that is probably filled with deception, lies and secrets," Hakuei finished not so optimistically. "I don't see why everyone wants to assume their lives are so much better than the ones that we have down here. How do we know their lives aren't much worse? We don't even know why they wear those masks all the time."

Both her friends had no problem answering that one. "Easy," Leila said. "Because they don't want the people to know who they are."

"But why?" Hakuei explained. "What kinds of secrets- how many secrets could the possibly have so that it's necessary for their own people to not be allowed to see their faces?" Marga hurried to open her mouth to object, defend the fantasy world that she had worked so hard to build up in her mind. Before she got the chance, Hakuei shook her head and backed off her attack. "Personally, I like living down here. We have good lives down here with the family and friends that we trust. I don't want things to change."

As Leila handed her back her change, another noise caught their attention. The three girls turned to see a crowd of people gathered around a man a little ways away. They hadn't noticed the crowd before, but over their conversation it had grown so big it was impossible to avoid. _So that's where all the customers have gone. _"Might want to be careful what you wish for," Leila advised her. "Sometimes the world has a funny way of giving you exactly what you don't want."

"Hakuei, what's going on?" She and Hakuei surveyed the crowd of people. It was a large crowd, though no one in the crowd spoke. Marga recognized Renna and Otto in the crowd, as well as a man she'd seen around named Cassim. It was a lively crowd, some people jostling and jeering in excitement and anger. But none of them were talking. Instead, all the people in the crowd were listening to one man standing on a stage, shouting something that the crowd seemed to find entertaining. "Who is that?"

"Some guy named Jamil," Leila told them. "He came this morning and's been preaching about how the twelve's rule is all wrong, blah blah blah. At one point he actually started talking about raising an army to rebel." Both her guests gaped at her in surprise.

"No!" Marga pleaded, desperate to defend the people she'd put up on pedestals.

Hakuei's worry was more justified. "Is he mad? Doesn't he know that the twelve have spies everywhere?"

"I don't think it'll be a problem," Leila shrugged carelessly. "He talks a lot but most of it is nonsense. Everyone knows we don't have the power to go up against the twelve, no matter what people say. They'll listen all they want, but no one's going to act on it. He's nothing to bother getting annoyed over. That guys just trying to start a fight. No one actually takes him seriously." Marga was

relieved with the reassurance.

"Maybe they don't now," Hakuei replied with hints of suspicion in her words. "But after someone here's the same thing for too long without anything else, they may begin to believe they are their own thoughts. The saying is 'there's no such thing as bad media?'"

The merchant was too busy trying to prepare the goods for the next customer to be able to really examine her words. "Actually, I think the saying goes, there's no such thing as bad publicity." They said their farewells then headed on their way.

Unfortunately for Hakuei and Marga, that was towards the crowd.

"Who are those strangers to rule over us, tell us what to do with our lives?" the man named Jamil shouted, earning a few nods from the crowd. "None of them know us! We don't know them! Who are they to have all the power that this world has to offer? What gives them the right to do whatever they like while the rest of us can only listen and obey desperately? We don't even know what they look like! They hide among us like snakes! You could know one of them right now and never have a clue!"

Marga gaped at Hakuei. "Do you think that's true?" She asked hopefully. Hakuei rolled her eyes.

"According to them," he added with quotations, "Anyone has the power to conquer something called a 'dungeon' and gain the gift the help govern the world. But how can we do anything if they won't tell us what these are? They say everyone has an equal chance to get to power," the man shouted to the crowd. "But why is it that only those with royal blood have been able to capture dungeons?"

Out of curiosity, Marga veered towards the crowd. But Hakuei quickly snatched her away and led her in the other direction. "Come on Marga," she whispered. "Let's not get involved."

Just when they thought they were in the clear, a voice from behind them shouted, "You there!" Both girls turned to see that Jamil was pointing at them. The rest of the crowd turned to them as well, curious and patient with anticipation. "Don't you think that the government has too much power," He asked with a cocky grin, knowing he put them on the spot. "Isn't it about time someone stood up to them? Someone should show them that they can't control us forever?" There were a few cheers from the crowd. Marga's blood boiled at the accusations made towards her heroes.

"No!" She shouted back, surprising the crowd. "They've done nothing wrong! I believe the kings and queens are great and powerful people, and someday, I want to meet them?" While he was surprised at her reply, it didn't take Jamil much effort to come up with a reply.

"How can that dream come true? They don't ever speak to commoners, why would they want to speak to you?" Her cheeks turned red and her hands balled up into fists at her side. Unfortunately thanks to her size, all it did was make her look adorable.

"That's not true!" She shouted hopefully. "I'm sure they-"

"I think," Hakuei interrupted, "That a wise man who really knew what he was doing wouldn't speak as openly as this unless he wanted someone who worked under the twelve to come and put him to death." Jamil's eyes widened. Perhaps he really hadn't considered that. A cold sweat started trickling down his back as Hakuei grabbed Marga's hand and pulled her away, a smug smile on her face.

Not long after that, the crowd had slowly dispersed, and Jamil left to cause problems in another way.

As they headed home, Marga asked, "You believe that the twelve kings and queens should be in power. Don't you Hakuei?"

She didn't answer.

4. Little Blue Spy

Little Blue Spy

Alibaba knew stomping around the halls of the palace wasn't something that royalty was supposed to do. But he was feeling very frustrated that day.

"How dare you speak at my meeting!" Ahbmad had said. "You are not a king, you are just a prince! Do you honestly think you can do a better job at ruling than me?" Alibaba had kept his mouth shut while his older brother had yelled at him, and Sahbmad had cowered at his brother's side.

Luckily there had been none of the servants or other members of royal families to witness his embarrassment. On the other hand, that meant Ahbmad was allowed to be as mad as he wanted to be. "I didn't mean to undermine your authority Ahbmad," Alibaba replied. "I was just saying what came to mind,"

"Keep your opinions to yourself next time," Ahbmad hissed at him. Sahbmad shivered, pressing against the far wall as if he could melt into it and never return. "Just because father made me promise to bring you to the meetings made by the twelve before he passed doesn't mean I want to. You may like to think you're better than the citizens, but you don't belong in the presence of the twelve any more than the rodents that you used to live with." From behind his flaming mask his sheepish face hardened.

"Rodents?" he growled. "What is that supposed to mean. Sahbmad whimpered and edged towards the door.

His brother wasn't able to catch the mood so quickly. "You know what I mean. Those rodents you used to live with? The kids in the street, you obviously, and that mother of yours,"

That was when Alibaba punched his king in the face.

Okay. So Alibaba may have stomping around not just out of anger, but to also find a quicker way to get away from his brother. As soon as he woke up, he'd been screaming bloody murder loud enough for the entire country to hear him. The only reason Alibaba had gotten away in one piece was because Sahbmad was able to distract his brother with the idea of having an exquisite banquet. At the moment he was

running around the basement looking for something to do until he thought it was safe to head back upstairs.

Alibaba remembered his life in the slums very well. Maybe it was because of his past that he was able to think about how the citizens would. He remembered looking up to the twelve like idols, everyone whispering secrets and stories about them, no one having an idea if they were true. His friends and him used to make masks and pretend to be knights of the twelve, running around and going on amazing adventures that had to be kept secret because they were too dark and dangerous for their people to know. (Aka, their parents.) He used to think that they could do anything.

Until he became one.

He remembered the golden mask that completely covered his father's face. He remembered his surprise when his father had taken off his mask in private, the first time anyone had ever taken off their mask in front of Alibaba. He remembered his mother's delicate blue mask that had been torn in half after his father's advisors decided not to tell the queen about his affair. And he remembered his father giving him his mask, and the first time he had put it on. And he remembered the realization that the idols he'd looked up to were just as lost and confused as the people he'd grown up with. Just as human.

A lot had changed after that.

It took him a while to find a place he thought he would be safe. A pantry. At least there was some fruit in there. If Sahbmah really did have to throw their king a party, Alibaba didn't think he was going to be invited. Glancing around, he saw that only a few guards with the plain full, black and white masks were around. He could deal with them judging him if it meant he got to keep his life. Slipping through the door he jumped in and hurried to slam it shut behind him. With a long sigh he slid against the door and onto the floor. Great. What was he going to do? Slowly he opened his eyes to see his entertainment for the next few hours.

A boy was covered in watermelon juice, munching on a slice as he stared at Alibaba happily.

Alibaba blinked. Then he blinked again. Nothing happened except for his blinking and the two of them stared at each other. Until the boy smiled.

"HI!"

"Gah!" Alibaba scrambled to his feet as the boy munched on his food innocently and happily. "W-what are you doing down here? You can't be down here, who are you supposed to be?" The boy just watched him, his blue eyes watching his every movement like a hawk. A very suspicious little hawk.

"Well you're down here," The boy reasoned. "Be careful, your mask is coming loose." With a jolt Alibaba hurried to cover his face, only to find his mask was set perfectly. Of course it was, they applied it with magic just that morning. They never came off. "That's a cool mask mister," he admired. "It looks like fire. Mine just looks like a sea monster."

It did. Kind of. Alibaba had never seen a mask like his, and he knew for certain that it didn't belong to any of the countries of the twelve. It was shaped like a sea monster, covering his whole face. It even had a mouth with pointed teeth and large scales in the design. However, it had a bright yellow circle on the forehead. It looked just like the design on his metal vessel. No one had dared to replicate it before. The colour was bright blue, like the sky. Outlines around the fins, eyes and edges were pure white. It reminded Alibaba of the reflection of the sky on the sea monster as it was breaking the surface of the ocean.

"Who are you?" Alibaba demanded. "Which country are you from?" Again, the boy didn't respond. He took another bite of the watermelon. "A-And stop eating all of that food! It's not yours!" Stomping over to the boy he snatched it out of his hands.

He yelped. "Hey! Give that back! I'm hungry!" Alibaba grinned as the boy jumped to try and get his food. The watermelon was far out of his reach, since Alibaba was more than a head taller than him.

"Not until you tell me what you are doing here," Alibaba demanded. "Who are you? Are you a prince? A son of one of the twelve?" They'd been told earlier that the country from the north wasn't coming, but the boy's hair was about the same colour? Maybe a little darker? And Alibaba had never seen them put it in a braid before.

"I'm not a son of the twelve," The boy huffed as he crossed his arms. "My name is Aladdin."

"Well Aladdin, what are you doing here? There's more food upstairs if you want." Alibaba wasn't sure why he offered more. The child looked like he ate enough for a person twice his size.

"No!" Aladdin jumped, making Alibaba jumped. "I can't go up there! I have to talk to you!"

Alibaba rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure you are. And ask me what, how much food you can eat without anyone noticing? I think you've passed that line," Alibaba gestured to the leftover mess he'd made.

The young kid shook his head at him. "No, this is serious! I've been looking for you Alibaba, and I need to talk to you!" He hesitated to glance back at the food. "When I was looking around I started down here and Iâ€¦wellâ€¦It all looked so good and no one else was eating it." He supposed that the boy was trying to be funny. Maybe.

Instead, Alibaba froze. "How do you know my name?" The boy glanced up at him. He was calm, composed, with an innocent smile on his face. Alibaba was stressed from his fight, lost from trying to find a place to hide, and shocked that the strange kid who Alibaba had never seen before. The Twelve prided themselves on secrecy. Everyone had to be known by several members from both countries. Alibaba had never seen him before. It had been nearly three years since he'd seen someone with a mask they didn't know. No one got through their defences. NO one. "â€¦Who are you?"

"I told you," he replied with a smile. "I'm Aladdin, and you are Alibaba, third prince to the line of the throne of Balbaad. Your mother was from the slums, but your father loved her and took you in

after she died." Alibaba tensed. Someone knew that much? No one was supposed to know that much about him.

As he stepped back the boy continued. "Wait, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, just please listen. Bad things are happening in the ranks of the twelve, bad things. I just want to help, but I can't do it without you!"

That had to be a joke. The watermelon in his hands was forgotten, fell to the ground with a splash. "Without me?" Aladdin nodded earnestly.

"Haven't you noticed weird things are happening lately? Hundreds of years of peace, and suddenly the council is debating war? A mask that should be invincible to any human material is broken in two? What about the suspicious rumors going through the twelve? Or the dangerous 'accident's' that have cause problems for all members? You know that the twelve prides themselves in knowing absolutely everything that is going on in all the countries and making sure that no one else knows what they can do. But there are things going on that they don't know about. How is that possible?" Alibaba hoped he hadn't heard him right. That was classified. Only members of the royal family were allowed to know that much detail.

"How do you know so much about the twelve?"

Aladdin shook his head, trying to get back on topic. "That's not important. What is important is that something is coming. Bad things. And I need your help to stop them before they get started. They won't stop until they get exactly what they want." Who? Alibaba wanted to ask who would get exactly what they wanted, but quickly shut his mouth. The boy knew a lot. If he knew so much, that meant Alibaba wasn't the one to deal with him. That kind of information went straight to the council.

"Look, if you think this information is so important, than you shouldn't be talking to me. Let's go find my brother, he'll be able to call a meeting and-"

"No!" Aladdin grabbed his hand, stopping him in his tracks. "I don't want to talk to the council! You should know that they are hiding something, everyone one of them! I don't know who I can trust in that circle. You are the only one I know is truly a good person."

"Me?"

"You!" Aladdin repeated. "You are the one who should be king, not your brother. I need to make you a king!" That was enough. Actually, those weren't the first words that crossed through Alibaba's mind when he heard that. Other than the thoughts of treason and the fact that he still didn't know who the boy was, another thought surfaced quicker. And that one he said out loud.

"Are you crazy?" Alibaba shrieked. "Y-you can't just talk about stuff like that here! If my brother heard you- or if anyone heard youâ€¦!"

Then there was knocking on the door.

Alibaba let out a shriek that only bats could hear. Aladdin tensed, and they both swung around to see the door. Their hearts drummed in their chests as they waited for another.

After a moment, there was another knock. "Prince Alibaba? Are you in there? I'd like to speak to you." In an instant Alibaba felt so relieved that he wanted to cry.

"K-King Sinbad!" Alibaba shouted back. "I-I'll be out in a minute." Turning to the boy he ordered. "Stay here. King Sinbad will want to talk to you." But when he saw him, Aladdin was shaking his head fervently.

"No, not him!" Aladdin begged. "Don't trust him, he's hiding too many secrets!"

Of course, Alibaba didn't listen. Pulling away he hurried to the door and swung it open. King Sinbad stood at the door, hand outstretched to knock again. For the first time that Alibaba had ever seen, he didn't have any advisors. With him. His eyes widened behind his mask, but the confidence never left his features. At least the features that Alibaba could see. He'd only seen him without his mask once, and that was when his father had asked him to show Alibaba as a personal favour. Apparently even Alibaba's older brothers hadn't seen Sinbad's real face, and only a few members of the council had.

Unfortunately, Alibaba hadn't spoken to Sinbad since then.

Until, well, now.

"Hi. Prince Alibaba, was it?" Alibaba's eyes widened. He didn't think Sinbad knew his name.

"Y-Yeah, that's me. I'm Rashid's sonâ€¦B-but of course you knew that, right. I'm Alibaba!" Sinbad blinked again while Alibaba prayed that the world would open up and swallow him whole.

"Yes, I know you. I guessed you had come down here after running away from your brother." Inwardly Alibaba cringed. Again. He wondered if it was possible for his insides would eventually shrivel up from embarrassment then he could literally die of shame.

"Youâ€¦You heard that?"

His head tilted to the side as he gave him a sympathetic smile. It was the most genuine expression Alibaba had seen in a long time. Somehow Sinbad was always an easy man to open up to, even if you hardly knew him. "I don't think I was the only one either." Glancing back he asked, "Who are you talking to?"

At least the distraction helped him forget his shame momentarily. "Oh, right. You've got to meet," But when he turned to introduce him to Aladdin, the young boy had disappeared. His eyes widened when he saw he was completely alone. "Theâ€¦The boyâ€¦Aladdin, he was hereâ€¦" But he wasn't there. No one was there. All that was left was the mess of watermelons on the ground.

"Theâ€¦Aladdin was hereâ€¦" He turned to Sinbad who was giving him a strange look. "Uh...This looks really bad, doesn't it?" For a moment he just looked at Alibaba like he was crazy. Great.

But after a moment, the feeling passed. "I've gone through way to many things to be able to judge anything as crazy anymore." He took a step back so Alibaba could walk out. With another suspicious glance backwards, Alibaba left the pantry and his worries behind so he could instead dwell in the happiness that he was speaking to the only member of the twelve who had remained his idol through his entry to the group. "Anyway, are you busy? I'd like to talk to you."

_Why does everyone want to talk to me today, _Alibaba groaned inwardly. "Sure King Sinbad. What do you want to talk about?"

Sinbad led Alibaba through the halls back to the main floor of the palace. While Alibaba was worried he would run into his brother, he knew he wouldn't bother him if Sinbad was with him. As they walked through the halls they ignored the workers who made sure not to make eye contact. The servants knew better than to try and talk to any royalty they knew personally. "To be honest, I wanted to discuss what you said earlier today in the meeting."

"Oh, did you want me to get my brother?"

"No," Sinbad shook his head. "I wanted to talk to you about it. Your father told me how you used to live outside of the palace." Alibaba's joy ticked back a bit. He hadn't realized that his father had told Sinbad that much about him. He'd know they were close, but not that close.

"Yes, I did," he mumbled.

"Don't get depressed, I wasn't trying to insult you. I just meant you are one of the only ones who really knows about what life is like outside of the palace. I wanted to know if you believe that what the council decided to do would work." Alibaba decided not to mention that he hadn't actually been listening that much near the end. They'd continued talking about different ideas to get closer to the public. In truth he'd thought it was weird. Back at home if people wanted to get closer to others, they'd just talked to them. IN the palace, that wasn't an option. Why did their lives have to be so complicated?

"Wellâ€¦We'll definitely have to find a way that more people from the twelve can be connected to the citizens. And not just say that they are, but actually get close on personal levels. What Titus suggested was good, but it's not going to do very good for too long. Now, but it's not a long term solution." After a moment of silence Alibaba asked, "What did they end up considering?"

Sinbad shrugged carelessly. "A few things. No one was really paying much attention. I don't think anyone's heart is really in it. They were considering holding more open parties with the citizens and royal parties, some kind of events where it's required for the royal members to come. I think someone suggested each member of the twelve would have to spend a year in the city? That was scrapped quickly, since it would reveal the person's identity."

With a long sigh Sinbad continued, but with a softer tone than the one he had before. "I hope you don't mind me saying this Alibaba, but I do miss king Rashid. He tried the hardest to get close to the public, even when it wasn't necessary. He wanted to be a man of the

peopleâ€|Always didâ€|" Alibaba thought he noted something regretful in Sinbad's tone. When he offered no explanation however, Alibaba didn't question him.

"He even had a relationship with someone outside of the royal house," Alibaba muttered. "Maybe we can get one of the twelve to marry someone from the outside."

The idea made Sinbad throw his head back and laugh. "That sounds like something I'd like to see. Who do you think it would be?" Alibaba laughed, any worry he had dying away. It was so easy to relax around Sinbad, so easy to let your worries go. He doubted Sinbad had any problems with the public in his country. Even if they hardly knew him, who wouldn't want to follow him? He was amazing!

"Maybe Mira? She already has multiple husbands, right?" Sinbad snickered at the idea of someone trying to convince that women to marry someone she didn't want to. He pitied the poor soul who proposed the idea.

"Doubtful. How about that brother of yours? Are you hoping to get anymore family members lately?" Alibaba cringed at the thought of his brother marrying someone he would have considered 'less than worthy to sit in his presence.' The poor girl would be safer trying to conquer a dungeon.

Rolling his eyes Alibaba said, "I've already had enough surprise family members in the last few years. Since we're on the topic, what about you? Do you think you'd be willing to marry for the sake of the war?" Sinbad paused for a moment to think about what Alibaba had said. As he paused, Alibaba realized how silly his option had been. "Oh, I suppose that would be ridiculous. I mean, there is the prophecies to worry about."

Sinbad chuckled. "The scrolls of Solomon? Excuse me for doubting the validity of those things." With a quick look to the sky he saw that the sun was starting to set. "I suppose I should head back. Jafar won't be happy if I don't get any paperwork done today." Jafar. Was that the man with white hair, or was it another servant that was in his party?

Either way, Alibaba didn't want to stand in his way. "O-of course. It was very nice talking to you." Unsure of himself, he offered his hand.

Sinbad shook it without question. "It was my pleasure. If you ever need a friend in this crazy place, I'm more than willing." Alibaba felt like his brain was going to burst out of his head and hug Sinbad himself. The legendary Sinbad was saying he wanted to be friends with him?

"Yes! Yes, of course, I'd love to!" The two of them parted ways, Alibaba naively joyful at the new development in his life.

Sinbad walked away satisfied with having gained another useful ally.

End
file.